

10-4-1969

Organization of the Assembly

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Recommended Citation

Nye, Frank T. "Organization of the Assembly." *The Palimpsest* 50 (1969), 558-570.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol50/iss10/4>

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Perkins—Man From Burlington

Prior to his becoming president, Perkins had been described as the Burlington's strong man of the West; Forbes the strong man of the East. After that Charles Elliott Perkins alone was the road's strong man. Forbes, who gave up the presidency in favor of Perkins in 1881, was active, however, in the road's affairs, but his role was like that of an elder statesman. Perkins was at the helm, sure of himself, of his railroad, and of the road's future. In fact he, more than any other man, made the Burlington one of the leading railroads of the West, and of the Nation.

The year 1881 was one of continued instability in Burlington territory. Jay Gould was at the height of his power. He has been aptly described by Julius Grodinsky, his biographer, as a "competitive bull thrown into the stabilized china shops." Always a trader, he "obtained results on one property by exploiting another."

The Burlington needed a strong man to do battle with the crafty, unprincipled, and piratical "Wizard of Wall Street." Physically a weakling, Gould was nevertheless a mental giant. Perkins complained bitterly that "Gould moves so rapidly it is impossible to keep up with him. . . ." And well

might Perkins complain for Gould tried to checkmate the Burlington at every turn.

During the mid-1870's Gould bought heavily into the Union Pacific and soon had working control. After that he used the UP to harass the Burlington at every opportunity. He tried to break up the Iowa Pool, formed by the Burlington, North Western, and Rock Island railroads to stabilize trans-Iowa rate making. Failing in this, he sought to control the Council Bluffs-Kansas City road and shunt traffic to and from the UP across Missouri instead of Iowa. Thwarted again, the quick-acting Gould turned to the Hannibal & St. Joseph. He had been buying into that road and now had enough stock to control its policies. In the meantime he had corralled the much larger Wabash and Missouri Pacific systems. The upshot was new and cutthroat competition for the Burlington, not only across Missouri, but over much of the Midwest.

Gould's getting the "St. Joe" hurt Perkins the most because it severed the Burlington's best route to St. Joseph and Kansas City. It infuriated Perkins, for he long regarded the H&StJ as basic to the Burlington system.

Worse still, Gould planned forthwith to invade the Burlington's territory in Iowa. He achieved this end in purchasing the Missouri, Iowa & Nebraska Railway from under the nose of Perkins. The MI&N, headed by General Francis

M. Drake, ran from Alexandria, Missouri, west and northwest to the Iowa border near Sedan, thence through Centerville and Humeston to Van Wert. Chartered in Missouri in 1857 as the Alexandria & Bloomfield, it had a succession of names and mishaps before it became the MI&N. By 1880 the entire 142-mile line was in operation.

Gould now proceeded to extend the MI&N toward Council Bluffs. If completed to that destination, it would make a through line, in conjunction with the Wabash and affiliated properties, from Toledo and Chicago to the Council Bluffs-Omaha gateway. Perkins countered by organizing his own company to parallel that of Gould's. Both parties bought right of way and did considerable grading. Finally an agreement was reached for a jointly-owned road which would terminate at Shenandoah. The line was completed in 1882 under the name of the Humeston & Shenandoah Railroad.

The inroads of Gould also prompted Perkins to lease the Chicago, Burlington & Kansas City Railway in 1881. At that time the road went from Viele, on the Mississippi River, west and southwest through Bloomfield and Moulton to the Missouri state line near Cincinnati, Iowa. From the latter hamlet it continued south into Missouri through Unionville to Laclede. The two-state property totaled 146 miles, not including trackage rights over the Wabash between Bloomfield and

Moulton, and over a Burlington affiliate from Viele to Burlington. Generally known as the Burlington & Southwestern, its antecedents went back to the Iowa & Missouri State Line Railroad in 1859. Perkins intended to extend the line on to Kansas City to compete with the Gould roads. With Burlington money the company had reached Carrollton, Missouri, in 1885, when the collapse of the Gould empire made further construction unnecessary.

Gould's invasion of the "Q" territory had much to do with the plethora of branches jutting from the main line in Iowa down to points on the Council Bluffs-Kansas City road. All these provided alternative Chicago-Kansas City routings now that the "St. Joe" was in enemy hands. Excluding the Red Oak-Hamburg line, completed before Gould came on the scene, most of the branches seem to have been built to ward off the "Railroad Wrecker" or other competition.

The first (going eastward) was from Villisca to Corning, Missouri, via Northboro. When the Iowa segment was finished in 1882 its Missouri counterpart had come up the Tarkio Valley to meet it.

A little further to the east the same situation obtained. Here a branch went from Clarinda down to Bigelow, Missouri, through Burlington Jct., Missouri. That part north from Burlington Jct. opened for traffic in 1879. Next year the

southern section was constructed up through the Nodaway Valley to make it a through line.

A third route, connecting Creston with Amazonia, Missouri, via Hopkins, Missouri, was an earlier pre-Gould undertaking, being spiked down in 1872.

Finally, the last branch in this category began halfway across Iowa at Chariton. It went in a southwesterly course through Leon, thence down to the Missouri towns of Bethany and Albany, reaching the latter in 1881. Here it met an independent narrow gauge road which had been built up from St. Joseph in 1879. Probably to strengthen its position against Gould encroachments, the Burlington leased the slim-gauge property in 1885 and widened it to standard the same year.

With the exception of the narrow gauge, it should be noted that all these extensions from the south were built under the auspices of the Council Bluffs-Kansas City road, controlled by the Burlington. Had it not been for the obstreperous Gould, probably two-fifths of these branches would never have been completed to their ultimate destination.

During Perkins' tenure as president, from 1881 to 1901, the following branch lines were completed by the Burlington in Iowa:

Clarinda, College Springs and South Western RR
Clarinda-Northboro, 15 mi.; 1881-1882

Humeston and Shenandoah RR

Van Wert-Shenandoah, 95 mi.; 1881-1882

Leon, Mount Ayr and Southwestern RR

Bethany Jct. (Togo)-Albany, Mo., 46 mi.; 1880-1881

Western Iowa RR

Fontanelle-Cumberland, 20 mi.; 1884-1885

Under Perkins' steadying hand the Burlington moved forward in many directions. Rather than temporize with Gould any longer Perkins ordered the "Q's" rails westward to Denver. In 1882, after less than a year in building, the road entered that mile-high city.

During Perkins' administration Postmaster General Walter Gresham queried several western roads about putting on a special mail train between Chicago and Council Bluffs. He wanted a connection for mail arriving from New York so that it could be hurried to Council Bluffs in time for early evening departure for California. The first road Gresham contacted turned him down flat; the second wanted a substantial bonus; and the third—well, that was the Burlington. Vice President Thomas Potter agreed to the proposition with no strings, no subsidy—just an exclusive mail contract. When asked when such a train would be ready, Potter promptly replied, "Tomorrow morning, General."

Thus began the first run of the famed *Fast Mail* on March 11, 1884. It pulled out of Chicago at 3 a.m. with a car of mail from New York, a bag-

gage car filled with local papers and a special coach for the postmaster and his party and Tom Potter. It reached Burlington at 7:40 a.m. having made the 205-mile run, including five stops, at an average speed of nearly forty-four miles an hour. Then like a jack rabbit it sped across Iowa, arriving in Council Bluffs on time!

Charles Perkins for some time eyed the rapidly-growing Twin Cities, generally regarded as Milwaukee Road territory. He prodded John Murray Forbes and was given the nod from Boston to build up to St. Paul. A separate company was formed with the backing of the Burlington, and the road reached the Twin Cities in 1886. An important by-product for Iowa resulted; it put the "Q" back in Dubuque for keeps. With trackage rights over the Illinois Central from East Dubuque, Illinois, to Dubuque, that thriving city was reached under more auspicious circumstances. The River Roads fiasco had irked Perkins. He made sure while he headed the railroad that it had no direct or indirect association with off-color financing. A man of great personal integrity, that policy carried over into all his business dealings.

Putting the "Q" into the Twin Cities, however, angered the Milwaukee. They in turn retaliated by building to Kansas City. Fortunately Perkins had regained the Hannibal & St. Joseph from the Gould interests, and the Burlington was in a better position to meet the new competition.

During the summer of 1886 and 1887 the road aided in the technology of railroading by fostering air brake tests on its West Burlington hill. George Westinghouse had already invented the remarkable "triple-valve," which sets the brakes by releasing the air. Hence, if a train parted, the brakes would automatically be applied. This device, while satisfactory for passenger trains, was not well adapted for heavy freights. So, exhaustive tests were made; and in the fullness of time an improved heavy-duty triple valve evolved, thanks largely to the testing in Iowa.

The year 1888 was memorable because of the great Burlington strike. The conflict, among other things, stemmed from the fact that enginemen were paid on a trip basis, the main line runs being more lucrative than the branches. This practice the men deemed unfair, and they pressed for uniform mileage pay. One thing led to another. The fact that Vice President Thomas J. Potter, who was highly respected by men and management, resigned to go with the Union Pacific did not help matters. His place was taken by Henry B. Stone, an able and honest man, but unfortunately more aloof and impersonal than the genial Potter. As a consequence, the men struck all over the system.

At the height of the walkout Governor William Larrabee of Iowa urged Perkins to arbitrate. Perkins, however, was against arbitration on prin-

ciple and backed Stone on management's position. Pinkerton detectives were called in to protect company property and non-strikers hired to operate trains. After much violence and some bloodshed the strike finally petered out. In the end the railroad "won," but it caused hard feelings and bitterness for a long time thereafter.

Also, in 1888, the road completed its high bridge across the Missouri River between Payne and Nebraska City, Nebraska, at a cost of half a million dollars. Prior to that the Plattsmouth bridge, built in 1880, was the Burlington's only structure crossing the "Big Muddy." Incidentally, the Plattsmouth span had the distinction of being the second steel railway bridge in America, the steel employed being made by the "Hay" process, an invention of Abram Tuston Hay of Burlington.

The last major extension made by Perkins was northwest to Billings, Montana, which the Burlington reached in 1894. Here the "Q" met the Northern Pacific and in conjunction with it formed a new transcontinental line.

During Perkins' administration three relatively unimportant Iowa roads were leased or controlled, all of which curiously enough began as narrow gauge lines. The earliest to come under the Burlington's protective wing began in the city of Burlington itself. This was the Burlington & Western, which left town by trackage rights (and another rail for it was of three-foot gauge) over the

standard-gauge Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern to Mediapolis. From the latter point it ran over its own iron through Winfield to Washington, a distance of 37 miles. At the time of completion in 1880 it operated under the name of the Burlington & Northwestern.

Probably to keep rival lines from picking it up, the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy got control and extended the road from Winfield to Oskaloosa by the end of 1883. In going to "Osky" it met the Iowa Central's construction crews at Brighton. Both roads raced each other to the crossing, and a pitched battle ensued in the classic tradition of early-day railroading. In the end, after pulling up each other's crossing frogs, a truce was signed and the crossing permitted to stand. The Oskaloosa extension went under the label of the Burlington & Western, which absorbed its predecessor.

The second slim-gauger was the Chicago, Ft. Madison & Des Moines Railroad. Organized in 1871, as the Fort Madison, Oskaloosa & Northeastern, it underwent another name-change before constructing from Fort Madison to Collett in 1884. Under the banner of the CFtM&DM it was widened to standard gauge in 1891. The next year the road was extended through Batavia to Ottumwa. In 1900 the 71-mile property was leased by the Burlington. Shortly thereafter the Batavia-Ottumwa segment, which paralleled the main line of the "Q," was abandoned.

Finally, the last three-foot gauge carrier to be acquired under Perkins went from the state capital to Osceola. Appropriately called the Des Moines, Osceola & Southern, it began life in 1879, and was completed three years afterward. An extension from Osceola via Leon to coal mines in Cainsville, Missouri, brought the total length to 111 miles by 1884. Following a foreclosure, a name-change and a gauge-change, the road emerged as the Des Moines & Kansas City Railroad, 4' 8½" wide. It was known as the "Blue Grass Route of Iowa."

More financial legerdemain ensued; and that road, along with Gould's earlier Missouri, Iowa & Nebraska, came under the umbrella of the Keokuk & Western. (When the Gould empire collapsed in 1884 the MI&N went down with it. Out of the chaos emerged the Keokuk & Western.) Then at long last the Burlington, in 1900, leased the K&W, making for order and stability.

Under Perkins' presidency the Burlington grew from a 2,924-mile road to a major western trunk line embracing 7,992 miles. He became a symbol of the railroad. Whereas most of his predecessors had other interests not associated with their executive responsibilities, Perkins was first, last, and always a professional railroader. His life was the Burlington and the Burlington was his life. He frowned upon divided responsibilities. Then, again, as we have seen, he was scrupulously hon-

est in all his dealings. He despised the policies of Jay Gould and the way the Union Pacific was run during Gould's overlordship. In this connection he disdainfully observed: "... two generations of speculators have grown rich out of it [UP]—one out of the construction and another out of the profits of operating the Road."

Aggressive, and a tireless fighter if provoked, Perkins was above all a strategist. As the writer, Frank H. Spearman put it:

The Burlington management has always been characterized by astuteness, and its people have cultivated the art of making friends. Mr. Perkins, who made that wonderful road what it is, never liked to have enemies or trouble. His motto was, briefly, eighty per cent of the business and peace. . . ."

On the other hand, Perkins was extremely modest as a person and shunned publicity. He, from all available accounts, never made a speech. If it were not for his voluminous correspondence, many of these policies and ideas would have been lost to posterity. Fortunately he left about 50,000 letters and some 50 copies of memoranda outlining his managerial policies, objectives, and philosophy. One finds, for example, a 30-page text on railroad administration directed to Vice President Thomas J. Potter, and files of letters probably averaging two a week to John Murray Forbes. Nearly all of them were addressed to the Boston financier as "Mr.," very rarely as "Cousin John."

Basically conservative in his views on labor, legislation, and welfare, he differed little from the average executive of his day. While he adjudged the Interstate Commerce Act as "wrong in principle" and feared regulation would be a step toward government operation, which would be "the sum of all folly not to say wickedness," he could also postulate, "It is well to bear in mind that most of the improvements to which the world largely owes its progress have been opposed in the beginning by the most level headed men, level headed men being naturally conservative."

In railroad stewardship Perkins showed great courage, never avoiding responsibility and occasionally advocating bold policies far in advance of his time. During one of his bouts with Gould he advised taking over the Santa Fe to strengthen the Burlington's position. But "Cousin John" renegeed. Perhaps if Perkins had gotten the financial backing from Boston, it might have drastically altered the course of western railroad development.

The grand old man of the Burlington resigned from the presidency in 1901. All during his term as chief executive he had put "Burlington, Iowa," opposite his name in the annual reports, and to that city he retired. He died in 1907. An appropriate monument to him stands alongside the tracks today on West Burlington hill.

FRANK P. DONOVAN